BLINDNESS IS THE GREATEST TRAGEDY OF THE WORLD WAR

But One Man, C. Arthur Pearson, Although Himself Sightless, Is Leading the Blind Victims of Modern Fighting Machines Out of Their Affliction

By EDWARD MARSHALL.

I HAVE seen them by the dozens, in London and in Paris, led by their friends or groping their own way about uncertainly—blinded victims of the war. I have seen them by the dozens and they are in London by hundreds.

In Paris there are far more of them and I by chance was present at a touching meeting. The wounded from Verdun were coming into a great hospital. Some of them were met by men, but more were met by women nurses and a few by mothers, wives, sweethearts or sisters.

There were six blind men among them—and a man whose eyes have been forced out by the concussion of a nearby bursting shell, or have been burned out, or have been literally shot out is not a pleasant blind man to look at. One chap, one little "Poilu," was magnificent—calm, dignified, apparently resigned. His sweetheart met him. I watched them.

He remained quite calm until, suddenly, he realized that he could never see her face again. Then he broke and wept. Her face—the face he could not see and never would again—was very beautiful.

In the tea room of the Piccadilly Hotel, London, which is the afternoon gathering place for officers, some of them alone, more of them with women friends and relatives, half a dozen groups are nearly always centred about some blinded youth. Many of these victims have been decorated, but the D. S. O., even the V. C., will scarcely help them to see again.

The devotion of their dear ones is pathetic. One wonders what it can result in. Will the lovely girls who now cling to these terribly afflicted youths, guiding them and helping them, make the mighty sacrifice of marrying them? They are swept now by the emotion of during the war enthusiasm, which, added to compassion, doubtless fans and magnifies their old affection. But can they contemplate with calm a lifetime with the blinded men? Ought they to marry them? Perhaps the tragedies which are to come will be the greatest which these men will know.

Out at St. Dunstan's Home for Blinded Soldiers there is one really happy blind man, whose happiness may be said to have grown out of the great conflict. The last time I saw him, previous to the long visit with him which I am about to describe, he was one of the most active and useful men in London, proprietor and active manager of half a dozen of the empire's greatest publications, including several great newspapers, a human entity, a virile influence of vast importance.

It may be that the blindness of C. Arthur Pearson, world famous publisher, might be twisted by a soul sufficiently devout into an evidence that Providence, foreseeing this great war and the vast number who would be in its course blinded, decided to prepare a man especially for the great service of acting as their helper and their champion.

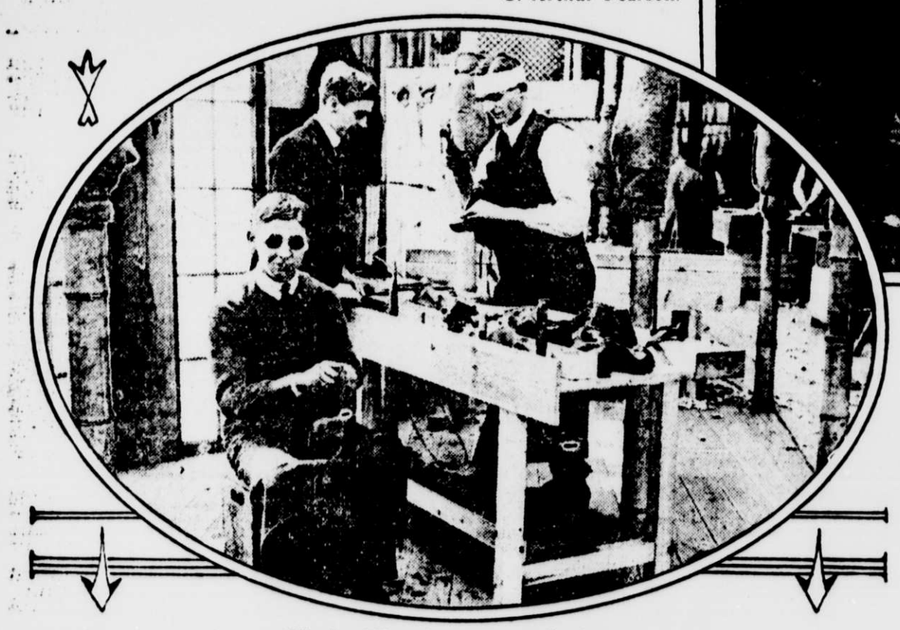
Pearson was not blinded in the war, but as was America's great newspaper publisher, Joseph Pulitzer, by overwork. The fact that he is blind, however, surely has been a vast good fortune for the men who have come home sightless from the fighting.

He is a tall man, not over 45 or 46, as full of energy as he ever was, but with an expression upon his delicately chiselled face which is very different from that it wore when I knew him years ago and he was in the thick of great newspaper competition.

He sits at a desk in what once was the drawing room of the great mansion, which he has changed into St. Dunstan's Home, and actively supervises the whole management of the great enterprise, devoting his odd moments to searching the literature of the world—through eyes other than his own, of course—for new ideas which may help him to help his fellow unfortunates.

It was impossible for me to mention the old days to him, but he spoke of them himself apparently without regret, and then plunged at once into a discussion of the work which he is doing and the work he hopes to do for the blinded victims of this war.

C. Arthur Pearson.



Blind soldiers learn to repair shoes.

"I have heard blindness called the greatest tragedy of the war," said he with that smile which was not in the least pathetic, really, but which continually seemed so to me, because of the memories of other days that crowded in my mind. "That is an exaggeration.

"Blindness is a great misfortune, but it isn't death and it isn't that thing which is worse than death. It's just a handicap." He smiled. "And you know the greatest joy of all is that which comes from getting on in spite of handicaps.

"Pity? We don't want pity—any of us. There is no pampering, above all there is no pitying here—and there is no despair. You see, all we are blind, so blindness is the normal state here.

"Blindness in these days," he continued with a smile I tried to think was very plucky but which, as a matter of fact, was merely finely normal, "means not at all what it once meant. It doesn't mean that one must be a lifelong burden upon others, for it need not mean unproductiveness. We are hoping that it will not to any otherwise normal British soldier or sailor blinded in this war.

"The blind, in these days, are by no means hopeless gropers in the dark. The lack of sight simply places upon those who suffer from it new necessities of achievement, and the greatest of the world's joys is achievement.

"I sometimes wonder if I ever knew such satisfaction in my normal days as I have known since I have lost my sight when I have accomplished some new feat of learning, when I have taken a new step toward overcoming the great obstacle. That, I am sure, is the way all the men here feel. Look about and see how many who will pass that door in the next minute will be smiling."

"That door" led to a wide hall in the superb old mansion, which once was gayly associated with the famous Marquis of Hertford, and which, by curious irony of chance, was several times visited by the Kaiser in those days. St. Dunstan, for whom it now is named, is the patron saint of the world's sightless.

Along this hall a strip of carpet, rather thick, serves as a guide for those whose feet are not directed by sight. Three passed as I glanced up, each with his stick tapping a little in advance of him to make sure that he did not stray from the guiding carpet. Each was smiling, one, a little sailor still in his uniform, so brightly and infectiously that I smiled myself.

"We're just like other people," the great publisher went on, "except that we've lost one faculty. The loss is great, undoubtedly, but why grouse over it? Let's make the best of it. And the best is very good."

The man's cheer is irresistible.

"We are distinguished here," said he. "This is practically the first assemblage in the world of absolutely strong and healthy blind men. None of us was born blind. All of us have achieved blindness, and all of those fine chaps you will see go by that door achieved it in the finest of all ways, in the service of their country.

"Difficult cases are those of the men who have lost the sight of one eye and may or may not lose that of the other. I have encountered several of these. I suppose years only will decide the fate of some of them."

I asked him what might be called the principal cause of blindness among those brought back from the front.

"I am not quite sure," said he, "but probably more have been blinded by bullets which, passing through the temples, have severed the optic nerve than in any other way."

It is worthy of record here that a wound of that sort would surely have been fatal at the time of the American civil war, so that many of these blind men would be dead men were it not for the advance of science during recent years.

"Concussion," Mr. Pearson went on, "has blinded some. There was the son of Sir Thomas McKin of New Zealand. He was standing near the edge of a cliff when a shell exploded close to him. His eyes literally were burst by the atmospheric shock. Of course there is no hope for him.

"I suppose a third of the men here have no eyes at all. One man was blinded by a bullet which struck neither eye nor optic nerve, but went below the latter. The swiftness of its passage did the work.

"But it would be profitless to go into details of the way in which the men met their misfortunes. The thing to do is to help them. That we can do by teaching them how to make their livings and how to enjoy life to its fullest in spite of their ill luck.

"We are teaching all that come, of course, to read books and newspapers printed in braille, the raised type which the blind can decipher with their finger tips. This and other things are taught here at St. Dunstan's by instructors who themselves are blind. That sets forever aside the theory that blindness means ineffectiveness, doesn't it?

"Great advances have been made in the instruction of the blind. In the old days, and not in days so very remote at that, it was held that a blind man must be given three years in which to learn a trade and become self-supporting. At St. Dunstan's we are turning out adepts in productive work in from ten to fifteen weeks.

"We can develop a fairly efficient blind typist in three months, and in six months make him very expert. One of our blind instructors here will take dictation in braille shorthand as rapidly as you will wish to give it and will then transcribe it on the typewriter far more rapidly and accurately than many typists with two perfect eyes apiece who now hold positions in good city offices. This sounds impossible. Before you leave go back and dictate something as a test."

I did and found that what he said was quite true.

By the side of the young woman as she worked stood a stalwart chap who less than a year earlier had marched vigorously to the front with keen eyes seeing all that one man could see of the great war's details. A month previous he never had touched a typewriting machine. He is not sure that he had ever seen one. If he had not he never will. But within a few weeks he will be a quite proficient operator, competent to take a job and keep it. As soon as this occurs he will receive as a reward of diligent application a typewriter.

Not far away I came upon a somewhat grewsome sight, for in a second room a number of blind youths sat quietly about a table under the direction of a calm instructor fingering loose human bones. They were studying the early lessons in the art of massage, which has become one of the most popular of trades—or is it a profession?—among the blind.

Their abnormally sensitive fingers make them particularly expert after they are trained. They are at no disadvantage in this work, for even men with sight who practise it must work by feeling.

I went back to Mr. Pearson.

"We endeavor to abolish all idea of affliction and calamity," he went on. "We assume that blindness is a handicap and nothing more, and that arouses all our sporting instinct. If these boys had not had that they never would have gone to war. If I had not had it" (he smiled) "I suppose I would not have been a publisher of newspapers.

"The blind find life far easier than they once did. The ability to write rapidly has been almost as great a boon as the braille type which enables us to read. Do you know that the typewriter originally was invented solely for the purpose of providing the blind with an instrument enabling them to write? That is the case.

"Many industries are open to the blind. Basket and mat making have their advantages, and there is cobbling. I myself am lost in wonder when I learn how expert some of our best pupils become at making and at mending footgear.

"These blind cobblers we are turning out will have as much work as they can do without making any draft on public sympathy, although that will doubtless and should help. But they will be good workmen.

"When they have become expert we set them up in shops with signs saying: 'This shop is run by a blind soldier from St. Dunstan's.' They won't lack work. One man found thirty-seven pairs of boots waiting for him to go to work upon when he first entered the shop which had been provided for him.

"The accuracy of these blind workers is not less than wonderful, even to me, who have had to train myself to many new endeavors. Cobbling and mat making go well together, and the cobblers will make mats when cobbling work is scare.

"Carpentering is another trade which we teach to the blind soldiers at St. Dunstan's. I do not mean that we make skilled carpenters out of blind men, ready for any edge tool task which may come along, but we make of them good rough carpenters who swiftly and well can make certain articles of patterns which can be repeated.

"Another occupation at which our men are becoming proficient is poultry raising. Chicken farming is an excellent occupation for the blind. Before we teach the men who choose it the details of this particular work we teach them rough carpentering, so that they can at least make their own chicken coops and hen houses.

"A sergeant left here the other day to engage in chicken farming who had made all his coops and 'foster mothers' before he left. He can run an incubator perfectly. He has learned to distinguish different breeds of chickens by their feel and judges weight with an uncanny accuracy.

"It is surprising but a fact that chickens are much less likely to be afraid of a blind man than one who is not blind. Perhaps it may be because blind men never move quickly, nervously. It is not safe for them to do so.

"This man can mix food perfectly, selecting it from mixed bags by the feeling, and furthermore he can truss and dress fowls quite well enough to make them as attractive as any in the Bond street markets, which are the best in London. And also he already is, and others presently will be, quite competent to engage in simple market gardening.

"Another occupation of which we have many hopes is that of telephone operation. The blind do this work very well. I do not mean that any of them have become competent to take places in the large public exchanges, but there are not a few blind operators in small private exchanges in London. The indicators are made to scale, and the blind operators quickly learn to distinguish their identity by the sound each makes as it drops.

"I have an idea also that blind men will make quite competent divers. We shall train some. A diver's work is necessarily done in the dark.

"As a matter of fact an observant blind man would do beter work in the water of a muddy harbor, for example, than a man with sight, for being accustomed to working in the dark he would find nothing unusual or puzzling in the fact that he could not see when at his employment. Darkness handicaps a sighted man. The sightless man learns how to work in spite of it.

"Two men, now blind who were commercial travellers before they went to the front will go on with that occupation after we discharge them from this institution. I believe they will do as well as they ever did in their old days.

"You saw the men at work learning the first lessons in massage. Perhaps that instruction may be regarded as the most important of all. Blind men become very expert masseurs, although massage has never before been taken up seriously as a trade for the blind in this country. In Japan it used to be illegal for any but the blind to become masseurs. Massage there is still the regular occupation of the blind.

"But in no western country has there been any way of training the blind to it. We have now started a special gymnasium, the model room which you have visited and other departments in which very thorough instruction will be given. It will be a great success.

"Masseurs are in demand at all the War Office hospitals, and we have been promised work there for every expert we can develop. None has yet qualified as an expert, but one-half of our class passed their preliminary examinations yesterday. It is delightful to observe the enthusiasm of the students.

"The development of the sense of touch is a slow business with most of us. It is a curious and generally accepted fallacy that merely becoming blind at once increases the delicacy of one's sense of touch. I assure you that it does nothing of the sort.

"Personally I can learn to become expert neither in the sense of touch nor in that of direction. You can't make me walk into a wall, however, although I might collide with a lamp post. There are those among the blind who have so keen a sense of obstacles that they would instinctively avoid one even as small as a lamp post.

"We have one man here who would. It is difficult to explain. He is a Canadian officer, and he thinks echo has something to do with his knowledge of surrounding bodies. He, too, has a highly developed sense of direction. He will rise from his chair, turn around several times and then throw a cigarette into a fireplace without error nine times out of ten.

"The blind men under training here vary in curious ways. Some get about without the slightest difficulty or danger; others, I am afraid, will never learn to do so. But then sighted people differ also.

"The important problem which we all are facing is what shall we do with the blind after we have trained them? They must be helped, undoubtedly, after they have left us. The question is in what way can this best be done? Their work must not be allowed to deteriorate after they have passed from under supervision.

"And they must be supplied with work. A blind man capable of making two pounds a week easily might starve to death for lack of employment because of inability to go in search of it. Blind men can make various useful articles, but they neither can find a market for them nor deliver them to a market after it has been found for them. Those are serious handicaps.

"The National Institute for the Blind, of which I am president, is to take up this work for them. We shall first supervise the work of the blinded, then find markets for it and then deliver the goods to it. To that extent the blind will need permanent assistance in most cases.

"One of the details of the affliction is that the sense of helplessness becomes a sense of weakness. Rowing is one of the few ways in which a blind man may occupy himself and feel a full sense of his physical strength and vigor.

"The grounds here spread down to the park lake, and last summer many of the men went in the boats as often as they could. During the season we developed a champion four which won several races with fully sighted crews on the Thames.

"America has been wonderfully generous. I hope she will take note of the fact that both in England and in France there will be need of funds with which to provide for the after care of the blind soldiers. Some of them will need it badly.

"We have two blind men here each of whom has lost a leg and six each of whom has lost a hand. One of these has but one finger on his second hand. What will these poor chaps do? They will need permanent help, certainly."

Later on Mr. Pearson was discussing the details of a blind man's life with me. Some were very interesting.

"Curious fallacies about blind people are generally accepted," he remarked. "For instance there is no particular fondness for music among the blind, contrary to the general belief. I know of splendid women who go weekly to play various instruments for the blind children and do very little actual service thereby.

"One of the things which those who love the blind should learn is that they must not be coddled. I remember one lad who came here with his sister. Her arms were about him constantly. She was coddling him.

"I talked to her about it and told her that she was treating him in the way which would do the most harm to his happiness. Finally she left him and for several days did not come to see him.

"He was miserable, declaring that he couldn't get along without her, that he must be taken to her. I frankly told him that I advised and should advise against it and I did.

"To his distress the lad remained here, where he had exactly the same treatment and good fellowship as all have, but he missed his sister's coddling. Presently, however, he began to get accustomed to his affliction and now he is one of the happiest and brightest and happiest men in the place. I ran into him the other day in the hall—bump! We came together with a crash, and the next minute I knew that he was down upon the floor.

"What's the matter?" I inquired. 'Hurt?'

"'No,' he answered cheerfully, 'but you knocked one of my eyes out. Careful! Don't move! You nearly step on it.'

"I also sunk to my knees and searched, laughing, till we found the missing bit of glass. He isn't blind but he's happy now."

Blinded British soldiers playing push ball at Mr. Pearson's home for their training in London.

HEALTH INSURANCE A MOST VITAL NEED

Felix M. Warburg Says America Must Take It Up if We Are to Compete Successfully in World's Markets

Felix M. Warburg. Photo by Pirie MacDonald

"HEALTH insurance legislation will be introduced here very shortly if America as a progressive democracy is going to compete successfully in the world's markets and at the same time conserve the stamina of her workers."

This opinion was expressed by Felix M. Warburg of the banking house of Kuhn, Loeb & Co., brother of Paul M. Warburg of the Federal Reserve Board. He was referring especially to the health insurance bill brought out by the American Association for Labor Legislation this year. Mr. Warburg explains his interest in health insurance by his first hand acquaintance with its working in Germany.

"I lived in Germany at the time the law for health insurance was passed and put into operation and the effect from what I have seen and from what I have been told has been excellent," he said. "It is only by means of a system of universal health insurance that the service of advanced medical science can be brought to the care of the workers as a whole, while at the same time the payment of joint contributions brings economic pressure to bear on the State, the employers and the worker himself to prevent disease. In other words, under health insurance all parties concerned are made to feel the cash value of good health."

"Does not the German workingman resent the levying of contributions on his wages?" Mr. Warburg was asked.

"I have not heard that the German workman resents this small tax on his wages," said Mr. Warburg. "It would hardly be reasonable if he did, since the insurance system divides between himself and his employer a charge which he previously had to bear alone.

"Moreover, as one labor leader pointed out, insurance has sprung from the workers themselves and the more thrifty were already buying their own policies before the insurance laws were passed. Another labor leader, I remember, said that the deductions from wages were 'self-evident.' 'Many men,' he added, 'go far beyond the statutory minimum and buy additional benefits for themselves.'

"The sums of money accumulated in the sick funds are largely under the control of the workers themselves and with them they have built hospitals and sanitaria, made loans and even undertaken extensive housing schemes to get better homes for themselves.

"I have heard thoughtless talk to the effect that health insurance destroys the initiative of the workers. In my experience, and to the best of my belief, it has the contrary effect, giving, in point of fact, the greatest incentive to cooperation and self help.

"Through the activities of the sick funds large numbers of private citizens are brought into public life and service. When ill the workers no longer have to beg at the doors of hospitals for admission. The hospitals make special terms with the funds which pay for institutional treatment of their members. One consequence of this is that the hospitals, feeling some assurance as to income, are able to get the most modern and scientific equipment."

"Will not the expense incurred by the system retard the growth of industry in New York?" Mr. Warburg was asked.

He countered this query by asking if it had retarded the growth of German industry or driven trade from the country.

"Remember," he said, "that this legislation dates from 1883 in Germany and the Germans have had a whole generation in which to feel the effects and to be put out of business by insurance if it was going to produce that result. As every one knows, it is during this last generation that German trade and industry and scientific advance have gone forward by leaps and bounds.

"Even England, her great trade rival, recognized this, and a few years ago followed her in adopting the most sweeping insurance measure yet carried. It was with this system in operation that Germany attained her reputation as a leader in efficiency and science, an attainment which we all admire, whatever we may think of her foreign policies. It is worth noting, too, that no country which has tried health insurance has given it up."

"You think, then, that employers have no real ground for complaining that health insurance would throw a burden on them?"

"It is just as reasonable to argue that the introduction of improved machinery is a burden to employers. Health insurance only distributes on a scientific and regular basis a heavy cost which society is already paying in a haphazard and irregular way. The better employers to-day pay part of the costs of sickness through different kinds of welfare work, while all employers are bearing the burden, though perhaps they do not recognize it, in the preventable lack of health and consequent lack of efficiency of their workers."

"Why is it not desirable to rely on private initiative to provide health insurance in the United States?"

"Private insurance never has and never can reach those who most need it. Every insurance agent knows that those who are living on the narrowest margin are the last to afford policies. Moreover it is uneconomical in that it does not distribute risks widely enough. By distributing these risks over all they are so light as scarcely to be felt.

"In trades where workers have an average of good health it is estimated by leading actuaries that at a total cost of 3 per cent. of wages, which will be paid jointly by employers, employees and the State, medical, surgical and nursing care and appliances, a sick benefit of two-thirds of the wages for twenty-six weeks in any one year and a small funeral benefit can be provided.

"I would like to add, though, that the advocates of health insurance in this country are undoubtedly wise in placing special emphasis on the preventive campaigns which follow the adoption of health insurance. Insurance gives the needed stimulus to wide and thorough health campaigns.

"To refer to the case of Germany again, the introduction of health insurance has given an enormous stimulus to the whole public health service from the Imperial Board of Health down to the small local committee which takes charge of public health and sanitation in all communes of less than 5,000 population. A complete network in expert health and sanitation service has been established. The result is undoubtedly seen in the extraordinary efficiency of Germany under the stress of war."

Mr. Warburg then called attention to a statement made by James O'Donnell Bennett, the war correspondent now with the German armies on the eastern front.

"Though many of the men are 50 years old," writes Bennett, "they are as sound as the lads, and many officers credit the amazing health of the soldiers who are far beyond middle age not only to the scrupulous sanitation in the war zone but also to the fact that for a generation the humblest man in Germany could through the German system of health insurance obtain medicines and the advice of excellent doctors for practically nothing."

"We are, it seems to me," concluded Mr. Warburg, "almost too modest in America in asking only for health insurance. In motoring through Germany in recent years nothing has been more pleasing than to notice the effects of the similar insurance provision which has been made for old age.

"Where the old people were a burden to the rising generation and had to go to the almshouse, they are now through their pensions, economic assets to their families. The almshouses are empty and the grandparents who formerly used to occupy them can be seen through the countryside in the open air with the children while the parents are at work. Sickness, invalidity and old age are insurable risks, and no more humane measures have been passed than those providing an insurance system to protect the workers against these inevitable contingencies."